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City may dump snow into Boston Harbor, Walsh says

As Boston grapples with recording-breaking snowfalls, the city may dump snow into Boston Harbor as a last resort, Mayor Martin J. Walsh said Monday.

Walsh said he has been in contact with Matthew A. Beaton, the state environmental secretary, to discuss disposing of snow in the ocean because more than 6 feet has fallen in Boston in the last 30 days. The practice was common until about 1990, when a massive cleanup of Boston Harbor gained momentum.

Boston still has some room in the city's "snow farms," vacant lots where bulldozers take snow. But plows could push some snow into the harbor, which has not occurred since 2009, city officials said.

"We haven't done it yet. We're going to look at it," Walsh said at a City Hall press conference. "It's not something right now we have to do."

In an interview, Walsh said that public safety can trump environmental concerns.

"We're not at a public safety concern yet," Walsh said, "but we will be if we keep getting snow like this."

Several other cities and towns -- including Lawrence, Lowell, Marblehead, and Salem -- have already notified the state that they need to dump snow into the ocean or local rivers, according to a state spokesman.

Boston would be required to notify the state and the Boston Conservation Commission that it needed to plow into the ocean because the snow had become a public safety hazard, according to Edmund Coletta, a spokesman for the state Department of Environmental Protection.

"Obviously, these are very much extraordinary circumstances," Coletta said. "It's difficult to find a place for it and keep the public safe. They are allowed to [dump

snow in the ocean] . . . they just need to notify us."

The US Coast Guard station in Boston's North End has also notified the state it needs to dump snow in the ocean. Crews at Logan International Airport have deployed snow melters and do not plan to push snow off the runways and into the harbor, according to spokesman Matthew Brelis of the Massachusetts Port Authority, which operates the airport. Logan has remained open during the storm.

"Snow melters are whittling down the snow piles," he said.

Under normal circumstances, state law prohibits dumping snow in public waterways because plows pick up oil, metals, and other contaminants. The practice is allowed in extreme circumstances when public safety is at risk, Coletta said. Public works crews must first remove debris from snow and cannot push it into shallow water or wetlands.

Environmental watchdogs expressed support for using waterways to dispose of snow under extreme circumstances.

"It's good that it's a last resort and not a first resort," said Bruce Berman, spokesman for the advocacy group Save the Harbor/Save the Bay. "We prefer not to have to put it in, but when there's an extraordinary condition -- and these are certainly extraordinary conditions -- we support this. If the mayor feels we need to do it, we'll support him on it."

That sentiment was echoed by George Bachrach of the Environmental League of Massachusetts. Bachrach said he is 5 feet 6 inches tall and the snow has "topped him."

"I think an argument can be made for public safety," Bachrach said. "We rely on the mayor to use the harbor as the dumping point only as a last resort. We may have reached that moment."

Lawrence Mayor Daniel Rivera said his city may as a "last resort" dump snow into canals and the Merrimack River if the city's three snow farms run out of room. Monday, he posted photos online showing massive mounds of snow at the farms.

"We're going to get to a point where we can't push it anywhere else," Rivera said. "It's coming down two inches an hour. . . . When it stops, we're going to have a lot of snow to move."

Rivera said city crews would dump only newly fallen snow to avoid sully the water with debris or motor oil scooped from the streets.

"We don't want to contaminate the river," he said, adding, "Most of the real dirty stuff is at the very bottom of these mounds and they won't see the light of day for months."

In Lowell, Public Works Commissioner Ralph Snow said the historic mill city also may push snow into canals, but he doubted it will be necessary.

"We still have a big place where we can put the snow," he said. "As long as we still have places we can put it . . . it just seems like it's a better thing to do than to put it in the water."

Snow, who gets some ribbing for his last name -- a word that is grating on everyone's last nerve -- said snow is "everywhere." Snowbanks are as tall as 6 feet. Crews toil long hours to remove snow only to clear it again a few days later.

"I'd rather have no snow at all," Snow said. "That would make my life a lot easier. . . . People need a break."